

# The First Asian Pacific Conference on Library Science

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In March of this year I was invited to speak at and co-chair a session at the First Asian Pacific Conference on Library Science at Taipei. The conference was sponsored by ASPAC (the Cultural and Social Centre, Asian and Pacific Region, Seoul, Korea) and the National Central Library, Taipei. This provided me with a splendid opportunity to get to know a number of colleagues from a part of the world I had not previously visited and to hear about problems which often had a familiar ring even if they were taking place in an exotic setting. The theme of the conference was 'Library automation and resource sharing' and delegates came from a wide variety of countries — Korea, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, the United States, Hong Kong, India, Japan, Thailand, France and Singapore — with this part of the world represented by single participants from Australia, Fiji and New Zealand.

I found it particularly interesting to hear about the library resources of some of these countries. I was impressed by the evident prosperity of Singapore which I visited briefly on my way to Taipei and it was obvious from a paper by Dr Koh, Librarian at the National University of Singapore, that this prosperity has had its effects on library services. Nearly all the major libraries have moved into new premises and been given more space for expansion. However, qualified library staff are in short supply and there is an active programme to recruit librarians from overseas (including some from New Zealand, I was told). Three libraries in Singapore are implementing plans for automation. One unfortunate factor is that the Government has not provided funding for a central computer for the National Library and, as a result, the National University and Nanyang Technological Institute are installing their own systems. Dr Koh himself pointed out the problems which this could cause in the future and expressed his hopes that the Government can be persuaded to set up a central agency to create and maintain a national bibliographic database.

In Hong Kong the situation, as outlined by Mr H. A. Rydings, Librarian of the University of Hong Kong, is rather different. The three major institutions of higher education, the University of Hong Kong, the Chinese

University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Polytechnic, for some years have been in close consultation about the possibility of developing joint systems on some form of library network and in 1978 approval was received to set up a MARC database accessible to the three libraries and for a circulation system at Hong Kong University. This became operational in 1980. By September 1982, 90% of the cataloguing output of the University of Hong Kong was on computer. Originally it had been decided to close the catalogue and supplement it with COM fiche. However, there were problems over COM, the computer programs turned out to be more complicated to compile than those for card printing and non-availability of a suitable local bureau for production of COM fiche was a major obstacle. At the same time it seemed that progress to an on-line public catalogue with access by VDU might not be as distant as previously supposed. It was therefore decided that the interim stage of printing cards by computer would be extended until an on-line catalogue was available and the COM stage would be dropped. In

September 1982 the on-line catalogue was demonstrated experimentally using the circulation book file of some 100,000 titles.

Coming nearer to home Esther Williams, Librarian of the University of the South Pacific, gave a most interesting paper on 'Library resource sharing in the South Pacific region'. Mrs Williams described the serious limitations of finance, transportation and communication facilities which have led to the low priority governments have given to library and information networks in the region. Despite these constraints the libraries, and in particular the University of the South Pacific Library which serves eleven countries, are learning how to get the most done with the limited resources available to them. Mrs Williams made the point that it is not so much what the region wants as what it can afford that is important.

It was, of course, particularly interesting to hear about the development of library services in the host country which was described by Professor Chen-ku Wang. Since 1978 the Government has undertaken a project



A session of the First Asian Pacific Conference on Library Science, showing, left to right: Professor Tze-chung Li (Rosary College), Dr Calvin Boyer (University of California at Irvine), Peter Durey (University of Auckland), Professor Chen-ku Wang (Director, National Central Library, Taipei).

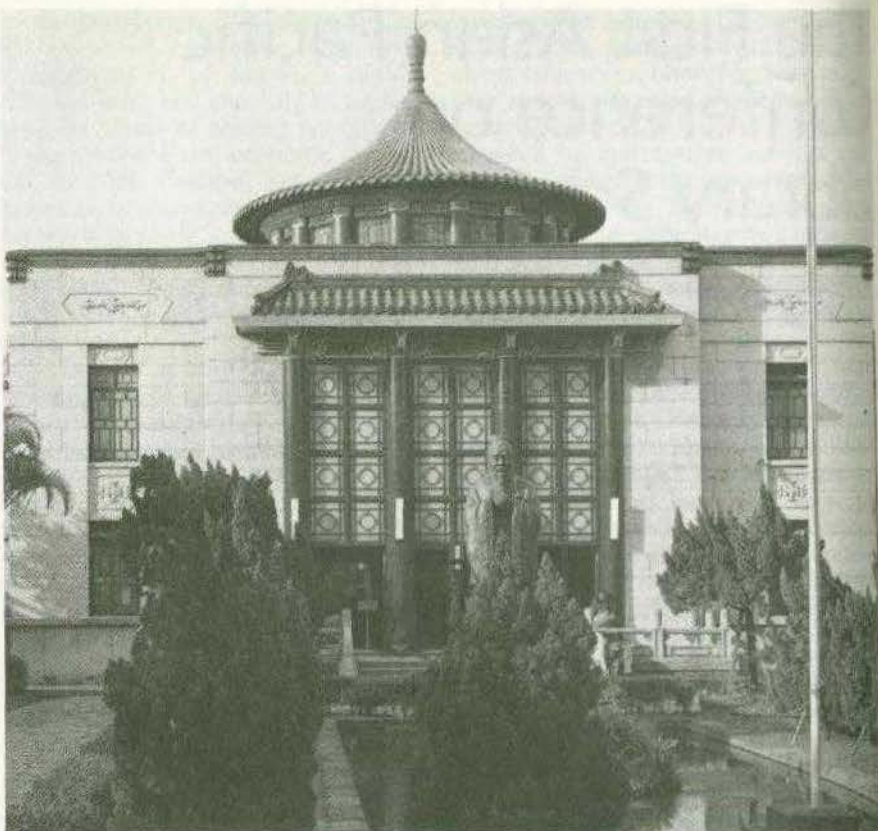


which it is intended will provide a cultural centre including a library for every county and city in Taiwan. The five library schools train about 300 graduates each year so there is no shortage of professional librarians and many have been sent abroad for advanced study. In 1980 a Library Automation Planning Committee was established and this has greatly accelerated developments in automation. In August 1982 the Chinese MARC format was completed and made available and Chinese Cataloguing Rules and Chinese Subject Headings have been completed for publication.

I was rather disappointed that we had so few opportunities to visit local libraries. We were shown the rare book collections of the National Central Library and the Palace Museum and when I asked to see a university library, I was taken to National University which sorely needs the planned (but not yet started) replacement for its overcrowded and uncomfortable central library. There are some more modern academic libraries in Taiwan and one that I was sorry not to be able to visit was Tamkang University which I was told is so committed to automation that all new members of the library staff are expected to have qualifications in this area.

One session of the conference was devoted to the automation of the Chinese language. It does not require much thought to realise the enormous difficulties which have faced those attempting to translate Chinese characters into machine readable form. Professor Jack Huang described one method which splits each character into three corners and then provides a numerical code for each corner. Later I saw this in use in a demonstration at the National Central Library. It seemed extraordinarily complex to me but the machine operator appeared to be able to enter data with considerable speed and the system produced some elegant-looking catalogue cards.

Another major theme of the conference was library education. Professor P. B. Mangla described the situation in India where, as in some other countries, there has been a proliferation of library schools of widely varying standards. A majority of courses lead to a bachelor's degree in library science or library and information science which is a one-year postgraduate course, and most of those taking it would have a good second-class Master's degree in a subject other than library science. Professor Mangla commented that unfortunately, owing to the deterioration in academic standards in India over the past 15-20 years, the number of students in each year who are academically competent is quite small and the number of students who are properly motivated to become librarians is also small.



National Central Library, Taipei.

There is no manpower planning and a paradoxical situation has resulted with many unemployed qualified librarians and at the same time many vacant senior posts in universities and special libraries because those with the appropriate specialised qualifications are not being recruited to the profession. One rather bitter comment from a Korean librarian was that in her country librarians who were sent overseas to be trained usually did not return to practise because in Korea they could earn far higher salaries teaching librarianship!

We had a very heavy programme beginning sessions at 8.30, finishing at 5.30 and then having ten minutes in our hotel to change for an official function in the evening. However, as well as making us work hard, our hosts did everything possible to make us comfortable. A gentleman equipped with an over-sized teapot provided a more or less continuous supply of jasmine tea during conference sessions, we had delicious food at every morning and afternoon tea break (I didn't realise previously how skilled the Chinese are at cake making), the canteen of Taiwan Normal University managed to provide elaborate and completely different lunches each day and we went to a variety of official receptions in the evenings.

Exploring Taipei on one's own is not exactly hazard-free. I had been warned that the traffic ignores pedestrian crossings, which is true, and soon learned that all streets had to be crossed

at a brisk trot to escape being mown down. The majority of people do not speak English which makes shopping an adventure and I never travelled without the address of my hotel written in Chinese characters. Some of the notices in English were rather fractured. In my hotel one notice I particularly liked read 'In case of emergency honourable guests will be alerted by speakers provided in every room for such purpose'. Sometimes, apparently, the Mandarin was equally quaint. Sitting in the Exit row of a plane belonging to Far Eastern Air Transport (or, FAT) the American Chinese librarian sitting next to me suddenly dissolved into helpless giggles. When I asked her why, she pointed to the 'Emergency Exit' notice. When I said I couldn't see anything funny in that she replied 'In Mandarin it says "Run for Life Row"!'.

For me this was definitely a conference with a difference. Although Taipei seen under leaden skies is not an attractive city, the warmth of our hosts more than made up for the climate. The conference provided an unusual opportunity to meet colleagues from a wide variety of backgrounds and to discover just how much we had in common. Although the conference did not produce any formal resolutions for action it gave us all a splendid opportunity to increase our personal contacts with colleagues in other countries and to create links which could undoubtedly be of mutual benefit in the future.